Romans 3:19–28 is a remarkable paragraph. In a marginal note at 3:23 and following in his German translation of the New Testament, Luther wrote that this place contains the chief point and stands at the center of all of Scripture. The paragraph contains Paul’s most detailed treatment of the “righteousness of God.” Luther famously recounts in the preface to his Latin writings (1545) that it was by understanding what this term meant (in this case, in the context of Rom 1:17) that “a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me.” He came to understand that the righteousness of God is not the “formal or active righteousness…with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner” but “that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith…the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith.”1 As we approach October 31, 2017, this text has not lost any of its importance either for the Lutheran Confession or for the church’s message to the world.

After Luther’s breakthrough, the meaning of the term has continued to be of great interest to biblical theologians. While the “gift” aspect of God’s righteousness continues to be emphasized, scholars in recent decades have come to see that the specifically theological reference of the term (God’s righteousness) cannot be ig-

nored.\(^2\) To put it in the words of Ernst Käsemann, the “gift which is being bestowed here is never at any time separable from its Giver.”\(^3\) As God gives righteousness to the sinner in Christ, so he also demonstrates his own righteousness. Below we will discuss what that means.

This contribution will unfold in three parts. (1) We begin with a brief exegesis of the passage. That will be followed by (2) some essential insights to be drawn from the text, as well as errors to avoid. (3) We end with some reflections on the significance of this text 500 years after the Reformation and beyond.

**EXEGESIS**

We begin with a brief discussion of the literary context. Romans 3:21–26 forms an *inclusio* with 1:16–17, the latter announcing the main theme of the letter. The gospel is the revelation of God’s righteousness, which is his power to save everyone who believes (in Christ). These two passages bookend the section 1:18–3:20, where Paul lays out an indictment against the entire world: All people, Jews and gentiles alike, have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (3:23). In 1:18–32 Paul details the sins of the gentiles. In 2:17–29 he lays out the case against the Jewish people. Between these two sections 2:1–16 serves as something of a bridge, where Paul calls attention to the impartiality of God’s judgment towards Jews and gentiles. That serves as a warning to the Jew who might seek security before God in covenant and law. Paul warns that mere possession of the law and belonging to the covenant are no grounds for “boasting” before God, for transgression of the law brings judgment, and external circumcision is of no help if it is not accompanied by internal circumcision of the heart, that is, radical obedience to God from the very center of one’s being.

Paul does not deny that being a Jew and belonging to the covenant bring certain advantages. Covenant membership means that Jews have been entrusted with the Word of God, which is a good thing. Yet Paul immediately qualifies this advantage, as he goes on to show that the blessing of God’s Word also brings greater liability to judgment. Precisely because of the covenant God is true, while “everyone is a liar,” so that God is justified in his judgment (3:1–4).

But this situation leads to a very real dilemma, not only for humans but even for God. If every human stands inescapably condemned as a liar before God, what is to be done? If human unrighteousness already establishes God’s righteousness, then is God not unjust to inflict wrath? Should a righteous God not simply forgive? Paul answers: No, precisely because God is righteous, he can and indeed must judge the world. But if no one *can* stand righteous before God, what is to be done? And: What does it mean to call such a God “righteous”? Paul will answer that ques-


tion in 3:21–26. But before he does so, he rules out one last time the possibility that the Jew (or anyone else) might claim exemption from the righteous judgment of God on the basis of the law; for the law, far from being able to justify anyone, only reveals the true depths of sin (3:9–20).

In 3:21–26 Paul gives the solution to the dilemma. In this dire situation God demonstrates his righteousness by freely justifying sinners who believe (trust) what he has done in Christ, without regard to works of the law. The paragraph is finely structured. The emphatic “but now” (γὰρ δὲν) of verse 21, to which corresponds the νῦν (NRSV: “at the present time”) at the end of the paragraph in verse 26, highlights the new situation that has come about in Christ, in contrast to the situation of divine wrath that lay over humanity before Christ. Declarations about the revelation of the righteousness of God at the beginning of the paragraph (vv. 21–22) and the end (vv. 25–26) lead to statements about God’s free justification of sinners through faith in verses 24 and 26 respectively, showing such justification to be the chief result of God’s righteousness. A contrast is drawn between this gift of justification and the situation of human fallenness under sin before and outside of Christ (vv. 23, 25). At the heart of the paragraph (vv. 25–26a) lies the christological basis for God’s righteousness and his justification of sinners: God put Christ forth as “the place of atonement” (ἱλαστήριον), the true “mercy seat,” through whose blood God won the redemption (or ransom) of helpless sinners (v. 24).

The word ἱλαστήριον has been the subject of intense study. While extended treatment is not possible here, the following points may be made. In classical Greek, words of the ἱλασκομαί word group have a propitiatory sense (as when one “appeases” the gods with gifts). But a development occurs in the Septuagint whereby the words take on the sense of expiation (that is, removal of sin) or forgiveness. Thus by the time of the New Testament, words of this group could bear either a propitiatory or an expiatory sense, depending on context. That is why one finds variation in the translation of Rom 3:25 in English versions. In the Vulgate ἱλαστήριον was translated propitiatio, probably in the sense that Christ was a means of propitiating (God). That tradition of translation was taken up in the King James Version (“a propitiation”), and it continues today in the ESV. The RSV broke from this tradition and replaced “a propitiation” with “an expiation.” In either case, however, a problem is that such generic (and abstract) meanings are not otherwise attested for this word. The same critique applies to the (bloody) “sacrifice of atonement” in the NRSV and NIV.

There is much to be said for the translation, “the place of atonement.” In the Septuagint ἱλαστήριον translates ἱλάσμα, the so-called “mercy seat” that was to be placed on top of the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies according to Exod 25:17. “Mercy seat” (Gnadenstuhl) was Luther’s preferred translation in Rom 3:25, with the curious result that, when the Lutheran Confessions cite or allude to this verse, sometimes Christ is spoken of as the mercy seat, and other times as the “propitiator” or the like (following the Latin tradition). Although I believe that Paul is
alluding to the mercy seat, I prefer the term “the place of atonement,” because it is etymologically more faithful to the Greek, and because it brings into view the rich biblical theology of atonement.

The way that we translate the word has enormous implications for how we imagine God and what God has done in Christ. If one translates “propitiation,” it sounds as though God has put forth Christ as a means to appease his own anger. Such an interpretation is odd, and there is little in the rest of the Pauline literature to commend it. But if we follow the translation, “the place of atonement,” with allusion to the Old Testament mercy seat, the whole horizon of cultic atonement theology opens itself up before us. This theology, I contend, most adequately explains Paul’s use of ἱλαστήριον.

Because of their sins, all the people of the world, Jews and Gentiles alike, were “storing up” God’s wrath against themselves (2:5). If nothing had been done, the situation would eventually have led to a total and eternal breach in the relationship between God and humanity.

According to Lev 16:14–15, on the Day of Atonement the high priest was to sprinkle the blood of the sin offerings on and before the ἱλαστήριον. The sin offering was the God-given means by which the priests of Israel were to effect atonement for the people of Israel by removing the (guilt of) sin from upon them (Lev 10:17). The sin offering had this power in that God himself had given the blood of the sin offerings to serve as a ransom for the lives of the people (Lev 17:11). But there is another dimension to these rites. In the priestly theology, the temple was regarded as the place where God made his dwelling among the people. Sin was understood to generate an impurity that defiled the temple. Left unatoned, this impurity would “build up” to such a degree that it would eventually drive God away from the temple in his wrath, leaving both the temple and the people vulnerable to death and destruction (cf. Ezek 8–11). The blood of the sin offerings purified the temple. Thus the sin offerings, besides serving as a ransom for the people, removed (objectively) the sin that was the cause of God’s wrath.

Romans 1–3 fits well within the framework of this theology. Because of their sins, all the people of the world, Jews and Gentiles alike, were “storing up” God’s wrath against themselves (2:5). If nothing had been done, the situation would eventually have led to a total and eternal breach in the relationship between God and humanity. Into this situation God graciously intervened, giving all humans a way to stand justified before God. The death of Christ is a ransom for us (Rom 3:24; cf. 1 Cor 6:20; Gal 3:13), God’s gift. In his death Christ also objectively removed sin, in that God made him to be sin (2 Cor 5:21), that is, to embody sin, so

The NRSV gives “a place of atonement” as an alternative translation.
that in his crucifixion, death, and resurrection he once and for all destroyed the power of sin (Rom 6:10; 8:3), and that in him we might be justified (2 Cor 5:21).

This action of God to save us demonstrates his righteousness, that is, his mercy in freely justifying sinners (Rom 3:21–26). The question arises whether God’s righteousness also includes his justice. That is, does God demonstrate not only his mercy but also his justice in the death of Christ? While there is some debate about this point, it is my view that this is how Paul understands the matter. In verse 26 Paul affirms that God is “just” or “righteous” (δικαιος). Some interpreters take this adjective as explicated by the following participial phrase, that God justifies (δικαιοσύνη) the one who has faith. On this interpretation, God’s being righteous refers to his covenant faithfulness, in which he acts “rightly” in forgiving sins. However, God’s judicial righteousness has been in view since 3:4–5. Furthermore, on the most likely interpretation of 3:25, God demonstrated his righteousness in Christ because he had “passed over” (πέρεσε) previously committed sins. In other words, in the time before the death of Christ, God had not fully dealt with human sin (2:4). God’s just judgment on sin was still to come (2:6). Now, in the death of Christ, we see the due penalty of sin (1:32). We see that death is indeed the wages of sin (6:23), the just condemnation of sinners under the law (2 Cor 3:6–7, 9). The death of Christ is then not only a demonstration of God’s mercy in freely forgiving sinners, but also of divine justice. In the death of Christ, the mercy and the justice of God perfectly converge. By faith (Rom 3:25) we accept and appropriate for ourselves what God has done for us in Christ: Christ’s death under the condemnation of the law (Gal 3:13) becomes our condemnation to death under the law (Gal 2:19), and at the same time our acquittal (Rom 6:7).

**ESSENTIAL INSIGHTS, AND ERRORS TO AVOID**

More clearly than anywhere else, Paul spells out here both the true situation of humanity before God and God’s unmerited, gracious action to save. Because all people are profoundly—to the center of their being—corrupted by sin, no one can justify himself/herself before God by works of the law. Out of sheer mercy God has found a way to justify all people apart from the law. In the death of Christ God removes sin, and through faith in him he frees us from the condemnation of the law. In so doing, he also sets aside his own wrath against us, reconciles us to himself, and opens the way to eternal life with him.

Whether Paul has God’s “justice” in view in this passage or not, it is clear from chapters 1–3 that Christ delivers us from the wrath of God and God’s just judgment. But just here there are two errors to avoid. First, I think that it is unhelpful to speak of God’s wrath being “satisfied” in the death of Christ, as has been held in some traditional theories of atonement and as one sometimes hears still today.⁵

⁵For example, we hear in the popular song of Keith Getty and Stuart Townend, “In Christ Alone”: “Till on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied; for ev’ry sin on Him was laid—here in the death of Christ I live.” To be clear: the problem is not speaking about the removal of the wrath of God—which we must retain to be
at least if that is taken in the sense that God could not be (or even become) merciful to sinners until a death had occurred. While such an idea can be found in ancient Jewish texts (e.g., 2 Macc 8:5; cf. 4 Macc 6:28), it is not Pauline. God does not suddenly become merciful because of the death of Christ as though, once his wrath was satisfied, he could then show mercy. No, the death of Christ is a demonstration of the love of God (Rom 5:8) in that, while we were still his enemies (5:10) and therefore objects of his wrath, Christ died for us! God at his own initiative sets aside his wrath, by graciously removing the sin that is the cause of his wrath, thereby reconciling us to himself (2 Cor 5:18–19; Rom 5:10–11).  

But second, it would be equally wrong to say that the death of Christ somehow “fixes” God—as though, now that God has demonstrated his love in Christ, he has “moved beyond” or “gotten over” his wrath. One finds this idea in some strands of Heilsgeschichte theology or liberal Protestantism, where the death of Christ brings about a new stage in history or a new relationship between God and humanity, in which divine wrath is relegated to an older and now surpassed period of history. No, in a world fallen under sin God has every right to be angry at humans who remain hostile to him. That is why Paul can speak of Christ saving believers from the wrath of God still in the future (Rom 5:9; 1 Thess 1:10). The righteous and holy God will judge the world. But those who trust that Christ died and rose for them will be saved.

CONTINUING REFORMATION

Luther’s rediscovery of the righteousness of God given to faith was central to his work as a late medieval (or early modern) reformer of the church. Five hundred years later we live in a very different situation. Yet Paul’s theology of the righteousness of God remains as relevant to the church and world today as it was then. I suggest three ways in which this theology should continue to shape the church’s message to the world.

Five hundred years later we live in a very different situation. Yet Paul’s theology of the righteousness of God remains as relevant to the church and world today as it was then.

First, in a world that desperately longs for both justice and mercy, whether within or outside of the framework of religious faith, the Pauline message of the faithful to Scripture—but the notion of satisfaction. For Paul the death of Christ is the means by which God rescues sinners from his wrath, and even a demonstration of his wrath, but that is different from saying that the death was needed to “satisfy” God’s wrath.

6As I. Howard Marshall, “The Meaning of ‘Reconciliation,’” in Unity and Diversity in New Testament Theology: Essays in Honor of George E. Ladd, ed. R. Guelich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 117–132, shows, Paul uses “reconciliation” language in a way not otherwise attested in antiquity: God (the offended party) is not reconciled (passive), but reconciles (active) the world (the offending party) to himself by not counting their own trespasses against them (2 Cor 5:18–19).
righteousness of God in Christ is a great gift. Crucial is the image of God that the churches present to the world. At the heart of all reality is a God who is perfect in mercy and justice. While other religions might teach this, in Christ God has definitively shown it and enacted it. In Christ we encounter a God who, out of the depths of infinite mercy, but without denying his own justice, freely offers a way to salvation for all of humanity through faith. God is not one whose wrath had to be appeased or fixed by the death of Christ. Rather, Christ’s death is a judgment upon all of us—we see in it the just wages of sin—and at the same God’s gracious offer of a way out.

Second, this revelation is a summons to the world, and above all to the church itself, to repentance and truth. People today are disappointed at the failure of institutions, both secular and Christian, to deliver what they promise. The world is rightly shocked at the horrendous crimes that have been committed, by ministers of Christ themselves, against Jesus’ “little ones.” They are scandalized by the immoral behavior of some Christian leaders. In this situation the church has an essential message. It is difficult for the church to be heard when its own credibility has been compromised. Yet all the more must this message be heard, not in the first instance because the church claims to have the cure for the world’s ills, but because in the first instance it has the right diagnosis of them, namely: “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Therefore they are (only) “justified by [God’s] grace as a gift…. ” This is a judgment that the churches must confess to be true first of all of themselves. Despite our quests for holiness or social justice or whatever other good intentions we may have, the church as an institution and in all of its members is corrupted by sin. In this light the scandals in the church today are indeed shocking, but perhaps not totally surprising. But that is why we are all called to radical repentance, to examine our individual and collective lives according to the revealed will of God in the Old and New Testaments.

Then, but only then, is this a message also for the world, for the body politic. The liberal-democratic project is being severely challenged today, as we discover that education, tolerance, ever-expanding freedoms, and utilitarian ethics are not by themselves capable of delivering humans from evil or establishing the good society. What has classically been called the doctrine of original sin proves itself true and powerful just here. Even with the best of intentions, the plans of humans, as worthy as they may be in and of themselves, are infected by sin. Despite their pos-
turing of self-righteousness, the agendas of both the political left and the political right lie under sin’s power. They too are called to repentance, to put aside all selfishness, self-interest, and special interest, and to seek freedom, justice, and the common good based on truth.

That leads to a final point. There is strong interest today in the relationship between justification and justice. It is appropriate for people of faith to be concerned about justice. One can acknowledge that in the past Lutherans have sometimes been too slow to speak against injustice, under the pretext of a two kingdoms doctrine. At the same time, there are dangers at the other end of the spectrum, of which I identify two here.

The first is that a new kind of self-justification or even works righteousness arises. There is a sense that if only the church proves its “relevance” to the modern world, perhaps by engaging in social activism or by doing enough good works, it will justify itself. But the church also is justified only by faith. The second danger is that in pursuing justice the church will take too much of a lead from humanist or secular values. Having been justified by faith and freed from the law, Christians are liberated to pursue good works for the sake of their neighbors. But who decides what is good or just? It is not possible to take up here the question of how Lutherans do constructive ethics. But one thing must be said: if the authority of Scripture is to mean anything, then in this matter the church must not substitute human ideas of justice for the clear commands of God in Scripture. To do so is to do the very thing that the Lutheran Reformers criticized in the church of their time.

God’s will as given in the Old and New Testaments remains the final norm for what is just and good to do or to leave undone until the end of time.

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7 *Formula of Concord*, Solid Declaration 6:3.
8 *Cf.* Augsburg Confession 28; Apology 15:14.